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SUBJECT: ELECTION SNAPSHOT: PERSONAL ATTACKS INTENSIFY AS
SARKOZY AND ROYAL MAINTAIN THEIR LEADS

REF: A. (A) PARIS 1283 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)B. (B) EMBASSY PARIS DAILY SIPRNET REPORT

Classified By: A/DCM Thomas J.White for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Three weeks from the April 22 first round of France's presidential elections, the two leading candidates have intensified their attacks on each others' character as they aim to sway the undecided to vote against their opponent. Polls released during the week of March 31 - April 6 show little change in the relative standing of the leaders: Sarkozy (1), Royal (2), Bayrou (3), and Le Pen (4). If there is a trend, it is that the Sarkozy-Royal leading pair is pulling away from the Bayrou-Le Pen trailing pair. That said, experienced commentators continue to caution that polls become reliable only in the week before election day, and many observers say they detect latent, potential support for both Bayrou and Le Pen that could still upset the expected finishing order. Not surprisingly, the operatives we have met with from the Sarkozy, Royal and Bayrou campaigns all exude unabashed optimism that their candidate will win, while rattling off reasonable arguments in defense of their expectations. One well-known political commentator contrasted Sarkozy's "excitability" with Royal's "normalcy" and believes support for Le Pen may be softer than many believe (reducing Sarkozy's presumed second-round advantage). Another viewed the choice for voters as between "anger and fear," describing Sarkozy supporters as angry about lawlessness, economic stagnation and state immobilism, and Royal's as fearing disorder, abandonment to market forces and the loss of state-supplied services. END SUMMARY.

LATEST POLLS: SARKOZY AND ROYAL CONSOLIDATING THEIR LEADS?

[1](#)2. (U) Three weeks from the April 22 first round of the presidential elections, the leading candidates in France's presidential race remain former Interior Minister and president of the ruling center-right Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party Nicolas Sarkozy and Poitou-Charentes Region President and center-left Socialist Party (PS) nominee Segolene Royal. The two are followed by president of the centrist Union for French Democracy (UDF) party Francois Bayrou and by the leader of the xenophobic, right-wing National Front (FN), Jean-Marie Le Pen. Polls released during the week of March 31 - April 6 show little change in the relative standing of these contenders heading into the election's as the candidates head into the home stretch. For example, according to a March 30 - April 2 survey taken by the IPSOS polling firm, Sarkozy currently commands 31 percent

of first-round voter intentions. Royal places second with 24 percent, with Bayrou and Le Pen placing, a distant third and fourth with 18 and 13 percent, respectively. The same poll also shows Sarkozy easily beating Royal in the second round by 54 to 46 percent, ("if the first round were held next Sunday"). This IPSOS poll was exceptional in that it limited itself to surveying those who "are sure they are going to vote." By contrast, a March 28 - 29 poll by the CSA polling firm of those who say they are "likely" to vote, shows Sarkozy again ahead, but by a narrower margin: 26 percent of first-round voter intentions, followed by Royal's 24.5 percent. In this poll, Bayrou is again third with 19.5 percent, and Le Pen still brings up the rear with 15 percent.

The CSA poll also has Sarkozy winning the second round against Royal, but by a much narrower 52-48 percent margin.

THE FIRST TWO PHASES OF THE CAMPAIGN

13. (U) UMP president Nicolas Sarkozy's formal designation as his party's nominee in mid-January is generally regarded as marking, conveniently if somewhat arbitrarily, the beginning of the 2007 presidential campaign (refs). In the weeks that followed, even though the leading candidates tried to get the electorate to focus on their respective program packages, the campaign was in fact dominated by televised question-and-answer sessions between candidates and ordinary citizens. This "participatory democracy" phase of the campaign gave way to a more traditional presentation and defense of platforms phase which lasted from mid-February through March. This "stances on the issues" phase saw the steady rise in the poll numbers of centrist Bayrou as many voters, turned off by both the personalities and platforms of Sarkozy and Royal, cast about for an alternative. Bayrou, however, has stalled in the polls, making it the current conventional wisdom that the second round will still come

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down to a right/left face-off between Sarkozy and Royal.

HEADING INTO A PERSONAL ATTACK PHASE?

14. (U) This last week saw a sharper, more confrontational phase of the campaign characterized by personal attacks voiced by the candidates themselves and intended to sway undecided voters. The undecideds are at record levels. According to some polling organizations, as many half of those likely to vote are not yet firmly decided about their first-round choice, and as many as a third of these could go to the polls on April 22 still mulling over their final decision. (Note: There are 43,973,024 voters registered for this election. Registered voter abstention in the first round of the last election (2002) was nearly 30 percent; it is expected to fall below 20 percent in the upcoming first-round.) The leading candidates' interest in highlighting their opponent's negatives in order to generate votes against the opponent is clear. Both Sarkozy and Royal are polarizing figures. Both are vulnerable to "TSS" sentiments -- the French acronym for "anybody but Sarkozy" and "anybody but Segolene" -- and both plan to make the most of the other's vulnerability in this regard.

CRIMINAL CODDLERS VS LIARS UNFIT FOR HIGH OFFICE

15. (U) Referring to the rioting at the Gare du Nord train station in Paris last week (refs), Royal criticized Sarkozy's get-tough-on-crime policies while he was Interior Minister. These comments prompted Sarkozy to reply that Royal appeared to be on the side of &delinquents,8 a reference to the fact that the rioting began when a Congolese immigrant with a criminal record was stopped for using the subway without a ticket. Royal ratcheted up the negative rhetoric (in an April 3 TV interview) by calling Sarkozy a "liar." Royal was reacting to footage of Sarkozy in which he commented on her reaction to his proposal for the creation of a Ministry of Immigration and National Identity. "What should I say when she calls me ignoble, for pronouncing

the words, national identity," Sarkozy asked rhetorically in the footage which Royal watched during her interview. "Mr. Sarkozy is a liar," Royal summed up when the footage ended, contuing, "Is a liar fit to become President of the Republic?" Royal went on to explain that she had never used the word ignoble, to describe Sarkozy personally, but was referring to his idea of creating an immigration and national identity ministry. Although the French press played up the confrontation for one news cycle, it soon moved on to other issues. On April 6, Royal indicated in public statements that she intended to back away from "negative campaigning," preferring simply to ignore Sarkozy. Even so, attacks impugning character and fitness for office are likely to intensify as the two leading candidates, ever more confident they will be going up against each other in the second round, strive to convince the uncommitted and hesitant to fear the worst about their opponent.

HOW STRONG IS LE PEN REALLY?

16. (C) Much of this week's press commentary focused on whether the polls are underestimating the strength of Le Pen, notwithstanding pollsters' adjustment upward of their raw survey data on support for Le Pen (refs). Most polls currently show Le Pen at between 12-15 percent of first-round voting intentions. Many point out that in past presidential contests, support for Le Pen has typically surged in the days just before the election. Moreover, there has been considerable press review of the way in which social resentments and the anti-establishment anger of those who would vote for Le Pen out of "protest" remain unappeased. Others, however, discount this "specter" of a strong showing by Le Pen. For example, over lunch with Ambassador Stapleton on April 5, Olivier Duhamel, one of France's most incisive political commentators, said he was "skeptical" about Le Pen's latent strength. He explained that Le Pen had become "banalized," such that individuals polled no longer ashamed to admit they support him; the current over-adjustment of polling data thus overestimates Le Pen's real strength. In addition, Duhamel went on, unlike in the 2002 election (when Le Pen made it into the second round), there is now no "cohabitation" (a center-left majority in the legislature and a center-right executive), so "people don't see the right and left as the same thing and Le Pen as the alternative" (although this is the card Bayrou is playing). Le Pen, for

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his part, predicted an "electoral tsunami" that would sweep him to power on the public's frustration. "The public now understands the desperate plight of the nation," Le Pen told reporters.

BAYROU: DOWN BUT NOT OUT?

17. (SBU) At an event focused on women's issues April 5 that featured appearances by Sarkozy, Royal and Bayrou, Bayrou looked worn-out, and often misspoke, apparently due to sheer exhaustion. Referring to the campaign, Bayrou remarked that he "never thought it would be this hard." Embassy political section FSN and Intern who attended the event came away with the distinct impression that the audience -- and others, the polls would suggest -- even if they may have found Bayrou sympathetic, also found him unconvincing as a burnished, fully-professional contender. Bayrou's key advisors nonetheless continue to insist that the tide will again turn in Bayrou's favor, and that he will yet renew his climb in the polls as a significant portion of undecided voters turn to supporting him in the last week before the first-round vote. The Bayrou campaign has just had a new edition printed of a booklet presenting Bayrou's latest version of the viability of his centrist "best of left and right" alternative. In a meeting with PolOff on April 4, Valerie Letard, a member of the French Senate and a key Bayrou advisor on economic reform and social issues, insisted that, "If you don't believe we're for real, come to our rallies and explain the fervor of the overflow crowds that we're still

getting -- they're not due to the tiny membership of our party." (Note: The UDF has only about 30,000 card-carrying members; it is dwarfed by the UMP, with over 300,000, and the PS with over 230,000.)

ROYAL: THE 'NO' VOTE IN REFERENDUM ON SARKOZY?

18. (C) Patrick Menucci, leader of the large PS "federation" in the Marseilles area and the person in charge of organizing all Royal's movements and events, in a meeting with PolOff April 3, reflected the growing confidence in Royal's inner circle of advisors about their candidate's staying power and the firmness of her electoral base. Menucci said, "We know we've got 25 percent of the voters, and they're going to stay with Segolene no matter what. We know we're going to be in the second round." Menucci then ticked off the reasons why he believes "She's going to win in the second round: One, the French have voted out the party in power in any recent election you care to think of; two, she's a beautiful woman -- she answers to the desire for change; and three, there is enormous mistrust of Sarkozy." (Note: He might have added as a fourth reason the desire of center-left voters to "vote usefully" and avoid the fiasco of 2002, when their candidate did not survive the first round.) Menucci made clear that he believed that Sarkozy's high negatives could be the decisive factor in Royal's favor. He said, "we're going to make this election (the second round) a referendum on Sarkozy -- and we plan to be the 'no' vote." (Comment: Menucci was referring to May 2005 referendum in which the French voted 'no' by a large majority to a proposed constitution for the EU.)

19. (C) Contrasting Royal's "normalcy" with Sarkozy's "excessiveness," Menucci said Royal would attract voters particularly among ordinary people in rural areas and small towns. "She doesn't need hundreds of policemen around her everywhere she goes," he said, referring to Sarkozy's attachment to being accompanied by a sizable entourage. Menucci then recounted the following vignette to convey Royal's normalcy: "We're coming back in the car a couple nights ago from a day of campaigning. It's about nine o'clock and she says, 'let's get something to eat.' I say, 'look, we're tired, we're going back to it tomorrow morning first thing, you should go home.' I drop her off at home and what does she do? She goes out to the movies on the spur of the moment with one of her kids. She's a normal mom who lives simply that way."

SARKOZY: THE RIGHT CENTER-RIGHT CANDIDATE
FOR A CENTER-RIGHT COUNTRY?

110. (C) The proportion of the French electorate that identifies itself as "of the left" or "left-leaning" is at an all-time low; this is a development that has gone hand in hand with growing political conservatism throughout French society. Among Sarkozy's campaign staff, much comfort is

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taken from analyses showing that, logically, in a second-round between a center-right and center-left candidate, the center-right candidate has a decided "structural" advantage. Luc Ferry, former minister of education and close acquaintance of Sarkozy, at a meeting with Ambassador Stapleton April 4, stressed his conviction that "necessary and effective" reform in France could only come from the "reasonable, reformist right." Ferry expressed his hope that notwithstanding Sarkozy's "unsettling excitability," enough people would opt for him and the measured, reform program developed by Sarkozy and former Social Affairs Minister Francois Fillon (who, Ferry said, Sarkozy was "nearly certain" to make his prime minister should Sarkozy become president).

111. (C) Ferry also said he had often "gone on vacation with Sarkozy and his family" and that, contrary to Sarkozy's public image as "hard-hitting and authoritarian," Sarkozy was in fact "affectionate and emotive -- an exceedingly

warm-hearted person who is intensely in love with his wife, and totally devoted to their son." Ferry went on to say that the election would come down to "anger versus fear -- two of the democratic passions identified by Tocqueville." Ferry contrasted Sarkozy -- a "considered response" to anger about lawlessness, economic stagnation and state immobilism -- to Royal -- an "unpredictable response" to fear of disorder, abandonment to market forces and the loss of state-supplied services.

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